

Swedish Immigration in Rockford

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For many years, different groups of immigrants traveled from their homelands to the prosperous country of America in hopes of achieving the “dream.” In Rockford, Illinois, one group of immigrants achieved the dream so many had sought by establishing themselves in American society. These immigrants were Swedish. They brought many new cultural values and ideas, made great strides in the Rockford industry and economy, and had several prominent leaders who contributed to the Swedes’ success in the “Forest City.”

The first wave of Swedish people came to Rockford in the 1850s. The majority of the people were craftsmen, laborers, and tenant farmers having economical difficulties in Scandinavia. Many came to the area because of the large number of manufacturing jobs in the Illinois area, and others came for the availability of cheaper farm land. The Swedish-dominated area of Rockford was on the east side near the Rock River. By 1880, there were a total of 3,500 Swedish-born residents in Rockford.

The Swedish people brought many new cultural values and ideas with them to America. They established fourteen churches of various Christian sects, seven being Lutheran based and others being Methodist, Baptist, and Evangelical. Along with these churches, they established a Salvation Army corps. The Swedish people kept a tight knit community. In order to keep the community united, weekly newspapers were printed such as the *Rockford-Posten* (published under this name until 1889-1911 and then became known as the *Svenska Posten*), the *Svenska Journalen*, and the *Svenska*

Socialisten. These newspapers contained everything from advertisements to news stories to obituaries, entirely in the Swedish language. Swedish was spoken exclusively in the Seventh Street Business District until the 1920s. Kishwaukee Street was said to be the most Swedish street in the area. As well as publishing and creating religious congregations, the Swedes opened one of the first hospitals in Rockford. The Swedish-American Hospital was founded in 1911 and opened in 1917. This local hospital still provides medical care to the Rockford area today.

The Swedish population did not start to impact the economy until the 1870s. When it did start, many new Swedish owned industries boosted the Rockford economy. The Swedish people were incredibly skilled in furniture making and metal working. The Swedes created the furniture making business in Rockford. In 1876, one of the first businesses started was the Union Furniture Company. This company was owned and operated by Swedish craftsmen who were underpaid in American factories. The new factory was one of the first Rockford companies to use waterpower technology to produce their products. Another major enterprise was the Nelson Knitting Company, which had new machines that could knit and package socks. The success of these two companies created a domino effect of starting new enterprises. These companies included furniture, manufacturing, sewing machines, mattress, mills, glass, and piano-making. Over one hundred businesses were owned and run by people of Swedish descent. As well as businesses, the Swedes owned three of Rockford's national banks. "We cannot but marvel at the achievements of these poor emigrants hailing from poor homes in Sweden, transplanted here in rich America, who in less than sixty years of activity have accomplished such Herculean work," wrote one historian in 1928.

Swedish settlers had several prominent leaders in business that helped their success in Rockford and to be more exact, in industry. Two of these important leaders were John Nelson and P. A. Peterson. Both men's contributions helped the Swedish influence grow in Rockford business. John Nelson was the first Swedish person to break into the Rockford industry. He first came to Rockford in 1820 and worked in local factories. While working in factories, he created a joint that was then used to attach cabinet drawers. However, his genius in invention was not just limited to the cabinet joint. While working in a knitting factory, Nelson was convinced he could improve the machine being used, the Lammknitter, by redesigning the control mechanism. By 1870, with the help of William Burson, he invented a more advanced version of the knitting machine. With this new machine, he created the Nelson Knitting Company. His company produced "seamless socks" in an efficient manner using less labor. Socks made in the factory were eventually used by people to create sock monkey dolls that became popular in Rockford and in the rest of the nation. His innovations in machinery brought a new type of industry to the Rockford area.

Another prominent leader was P. A. Peterson. Peterson was a Swedish immigrant who took courses at a local business college. The Union Furniture Company sought out Peterson and asked him to help get their business off the ground by acting as secretary for the company. Even though he had only taken a few business classes, he agreed to be secretary of this new corporation. After the business began to become quite profitable, many more companies were started with the help of this blooming industrial leader. Peterson was consulted by many Swedish entrepreneurs to give them strategies to enable their businesses to prosper. He had a good reputation and was quite generous with his

support to the Swedish community. Peterson helped many struggling businesses out of debt, and was a huge investor in many of the companies. Upon his death, he gave a majority of his finances to the YMCA of Rockford and the P. A. Peterson Home for Aged Residents. His business sense assisted the development of the industrious Rockford of the past and present. Without men like John Nelson and P. A. Peterson, the Swedish people would not have had such an influence over everyday life in Rockford.

In many ways, the Swedish immigrants impacted the Rockford area. Swedish immigrants brought many new cultural values and ideas, made great strides in the Rockford industry and economy, and had several prominent leaders who contributed to the Swedes' success. The Swedes opened several businesses, some that still exist today and have imprinted their cultural values on the Forest City. Without the Swedish influence, Rockford would not stand out as the industrious, bustling city that it has become today. [From Hjalmar C. Nelson and Dennis W. Johnson, *Sinnissippi Saga*; Levi Faust, *The Rockford Swedes*; and John Lundin, *Rockford*.]